

Sermon for Sunday, October 8, 2023
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
“How to Be Free”
Reverend Amy Zalk Larson
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa

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Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

What do you picture when you hear the words, “*the ten commandments?*” Besides a scene from a movie, what other images arise? Heavy tablets that come down on us hard to get us in line? A giant finger wagging no, no, no, no? Sour faced people trying to restrict freedom and force the commandments on others? The commandments have taken on a lot of baggage, a lot of extra weight, throughout the centuries and recently in the culture wars.

God’s commands *are* weighty and important, but we miss something when we approach them only as obligations imposed on ourselves and others, as heavy burdens intended to restrict our freedom. In fact, the commandments are all about freedom. They begin with a declaration of freedom. God says, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” And what follows are ten commands, or teachings, about how to be free, teachings that are just as helpful for us today as they were to God’s people long ago.

God’s people were in slavery because Pharaoh wanted more - more power, more land, more wealth, more cheap labor. He feared scarcity. He kept grasping, hoarding and clinging. He used and abused the Israelites to feed his insatiable greed for more. God saw all this, said enough, *no more*. “Let my people go.” And God brought them out of slavery.

Yet the forces that enslaved the people in Egypt are found in every land, in every time, in every heart. Pharaoh, with all his arrogant violent greed, is not contained in Egypt but is all around us and within us. Staying free from Pharaoh takes more than a one-time rescue. It takes an intentional strategy. So, God gave us the ten commandments. They are, as scholar Walter Bruggemann puts it, the strategy for staying free. This is a countercultural view of freedom - to think that following rules and commands helps us to be free. So often we’re told that freedom means getting to do whatever we want, not being bound to any higher power, no obligations.

Yet If we don’t follow the commandments, Bruggemann points out, we all find ourselves captive to that insatiable hunger for more and in the grip of Pharaoh: “having to produce on demand ... in the rat race of production and consumption ... living in fear, anxiety and alienation ... in hostility toward the neighbor.”¹ We can find ourselves ruled by greed, insatiable desire, and a sense of entitlement. God gives us a different way to live, a strategy for staying free.

The strategy begins with giving ultimate loyalty to God, rather than any other power, any ideology, political party, nation, group, or identity. All those other things promise a sense of belonging and

¹ https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2004215/walter_brueggemann_strategies_for_staying_emancipated

security, but they always leave us wanting more. If only more of my people were in power, if only I could find my people, my tribe, if only others saw the truth ... This kind of thinking leaves us lacking. God says, I am the Lord your God, I set people free. I set you free. Trust me. Look to me. Live in my ways for the well-being of all people.

When our loyalty is to our liberating God, then we can hold things more lightly. Then things we use, the things we own don't own us, they don't hold so much power over us. We're freed from expecting our stuff to provide us with more security, more power, more control. For instance, I put a lot of trust in my to-do list. It helps me stay organized and I tend to give it more weight than it should have in my life. It can become an idol. When I look to God first, then I can view lists and planners as tools, rather than my salvation. What things become idols for you? God says look to me, I am your God, I set you free. I guide you to life.

God also says you can rest, you need to rest so you don't fall into the rat race of busyness and exhaustion that the Pharaohs within and around us demand. Slaves don't get to rest, free people do. God says to us, "I am God, you are not, the universe doesn't depend on your activity, you can stop, you can rest." What a relief. Honoring God and resting also puts us in our place and helps us to live humbly with others. It isn't all about us. When we're barraged with messages saying, "You deserve a donut, a new car, a vacation," the commandments give us perspective and help take our neighbors' needs seriously.

To stay free we need to recognize the worth and dignity of every neighbor, rather than harming our neighbors, craving or seizing what belongs to them. The commandments point us away from the forces that lead to war and hostility and turn us towards care for our neighbors, care that helps us all to stay free.

The world would be so good if only we could all live out these commandments. Yet, God knows how much we struggle to follow this strategy of freedom, justice, and love. So, God has come, in Jesus, to accompany us as we seek to live in God's ways. Jesus is with us to challenge us, forgive us and renew us for this life.

The Holy Spirit is with us guiding us in God's ways.
You are loved and forgiven. You are set free.

Let's join in a moment of silent prayer and reflection.